Families for Kids of Color: A Special Report on Challenges and Opportunities

Preface

We have been bombarded in recent months with vivid, front-page media images of children caught in the cross fire of contested adoptions. More often than not, the children presented are attractive, the picture of health, and very young -- often not more than a year or two old. Large headlines above their wary, quizzical faces ask us, "Whose little girl is this?" or announce an ominous "Battle over Jessica." Inside the covers, we learn that two sets of grieving parents are fighting passionately to establish exclusive custody rights in a series of complex legal maneuvers.

What do these media images and stories tell us? Certainly that cases of this kind are agonizing and tragic for all concerned. But these high profile stories also promote false assumptions and questionable values. They tell us, first of all, that safeguarding parental rights -- not serving the best interests of children -- is the main issue facing us in the realm of adoption. They also suggest that all children waiting for permanent homes look a lot like Jessica, when in fact they do not. These stories also convey the inaccurate message that most waiting children will be fought over by two well-fixed and well-intentioned nuclear families, and that our only challenge will be to determine which of these families is more deserving under the law.

Current media coverage may also be reinforcing the limited view that traditional adoption, or a return to the family of origin, are the only ways to secure permanent homes for children; in fact, there are many different ways to give children a sense of lasting family connections. Some are known but not yet universally practiced; others we are now in the process of creating.

In sum, these media tales obscure both the plight and the possibilities of a far larger and more beleaguered group of our nation's children: "special needs" children in the care of our child welfare system (children of color; older children; children who are part of a sibling group; and children with physical, mental, or emotional problems).

The child welfare system provides publicly funded substitute care for children who must live apart from their families of origin temporarily or permanently. A vast array of public and private agencies, the system is charged with accomplishing a complex mission: to protect children from maltreatment, to provide care to those with absent or disabled parents, to assist troubled families with reunification, and to find alternative, permanent homes, if reunification proves impossible.

The number of children in substitute care has in fact risen steadily over the past 10 years. Current best estimates put the number of children in public foster care alone at 500,000 - more than double the number of a decade ago. (1)

The situation for children of color is particularly disturbing. They make up nearly 57 percent of the children in substitute care in the 31 states from which data are available -- nearly twice their representation in the national population.(2) In large urban areas like New York and Chicago, children of color constitute 80-90 percent of the child welfare population.(3)

We know that waiting children lucky enough to be adopted will first spend an average of between 3.5 and 5.5 years in a limbo of temporary placements.(4) Less fortunate are the thousands of children in care who "age out" of the system or are "emancipated" without ever experiencing a stable, loving, permanent home. It doesn't take an expert to imagine the terrible suffering and damage that circumstances like these visit on children during their formative years. Children waiting for permanent homes are among the most vulnerable and poorly-served citizens in our society.

Tradition and timely coincidence have made these waiting children a top priority of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. Few perhaps realize that the Foundation was originally established in 1930 to improve the welfare of children. It has continued to emphasize programming for children -- particularly those with special needs -- even as its mission has expanded. Four years ago, as we were finalizing the Foundation's Plan for the 1990s, we began to actively question one of the flawed assumptions that have traditionally guided early childhood programs across the country: that children grow up in their own families and are nurtured in their own communities. At the same time, many of us at the Foundation who are adoptive and foster care parents were reflecting on our own experiences with the child welfare system.

Out of these formal and informal discussions grew a resolve to find out how the Foundation might help communities and our child welfare system do a better job of finding permanent homes for waiting children -- especially those 90,000-100,000 who will not be returning to their biological families.(5) To carry out that resolve, we have developed Families for Kids, a $42 million national grantmaking initiative that has supported 21 national, state, and local reform initiatives with the clear promise of achieving substantial, permanent reductions in the number of waiting children.

In structuring Families for Kids, we were determined to focus our attention on a target population that has remained largely invisible to the general public and too little served by the reforms of the past. We were also determined to avoid two pitfalls common to system reform:

(1) the proliferation of individual, isolated programs designed merely to fill gaps in existing systems; and

(2) goals that focus on changing bureaucratic process, rather than on achieving specific results for children and families.

From the outset we have sought much bolder thinking and action: comprehensive, fundamental change that dares to look at the existing system from the child's perspective, that creates new policies and paradigms of care, and that measures success in terms of positive outcomes for children and families. To encourage the systemic reform we need and to ensure that our efforts and those of our grantees make a real difference, we have established these five outcomes:

1 Family Support: Many out-of-home placements of children could be prevented if timely, comprehensive services were made available to biological families before problems become unmanageable.

Outcome: Vulnerable families will have the help they need to stay together and meet the challenges of daily life.

2 Coordinated Assessment: Families and children who seek help from human service and child welfare systems must often undergo several time-consuming and redundant assessment procedures.

Outcome: Families will participate fully in a single, coordinated assessment process that evaluates their needs in a comprehensive way.

3 Consistent Casework Services: Because the waiting time for placement is so long in the current system and because worker turnover is so high, families and children may be forced to work with many different caseworkers. This situation causes unnecessary delays and loss of confidence in the system.

Outcome: One caseworker or casework team will work with a child and his/her family or families throughout the permanency planning process.

4 Stable Foster Care: Research shows that most children now in foster care have lived in several different placements, often far away from all that is familiar to them. Multiple placements damage children's capacity to value themselves and form positive relationships.

Outcome: Children awaiting permanent placement will be cared for in their own communities by a single, stable foster family.

5 Swift, Permanent Placement: Delay in permanent placement is extremely detrimental to the healthy development of children, and could be greatly reduced in most cases if new policies and practices were developed.

Outcome: Waiting children will be placed in nurturing, permanent homes within one year.

Because children of color make up such a large portion of our target group, we are also making special efforts to understand the cultural dimensions of system reform. In 1993 and 1994, the Foundation facilitated a series of dialogues that convened experts from those communities of color with the largest populations of children in care: African-American, Latino/Hispanic, and Native American. Their numbers included foster care and adoptive parents; professionals from philanthropy; state, local, and private agency representatives; advocates; lawyers; judges; educators; legislators; and administrators from community-based organizations. (See Acknowledgments for a list of dialogue participants.)

Each group spent many hours discussing the special needs and possibilities of its own children. Soon after the three dialogues concluded, the Foundation hosted a People of Color Summit, where representatives from each group shared their findings and reflected on differences and commonalities across groups.

To give these different discussions consistency and focus, we asked all groups to identify both key problem areas and specific actions needed to achieve the five Families for Kids outcomes. This report summarizes the reflections and recommendations from all four dialogues. The first section describes the participants' assessments of the challenges that reform must address; the second defines the major principles of reform advocated by discussants; followed by a section listing the specific actions recommended for each of the five Families for Kids outcomes. The report's conclusions reflect the major contributions of the dialogues to future reform. While there was astonishing unanimity of opinion and experience across all dialogue groups, we have made every effort to reflect the differences that surfaced in discussion.

The following pages raise some controversial issues about which reasonable people may disagree. Nonetheless, our commitment has been to fully reflect the views of all participants. We believe that our participants' views are especially important because many of our discussants have had unique experiences with the child welfare system. Too often, these views have been absent from the public discussions that shaped past reforms. Establishing a forum for these voices has been even more important for the Foundation and for Families for Kids than we imagined it would. Each dialogue advanced our own thinking, sometimes by directly challenging, sometimes by validating our ideas and assumptions. We trust that you will find these highlights helpful as you consider ways to make a difference for the children who wait.

Valora Washington
Vice President-Program
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Families for Kids of Color: The Challenges

All three of our dialogue groups defined a wide range of challenges to be addressed by reform. Most related directly to inadequacies in our child welfare system. These systemic problems were being compounded, participants told us, by a complicated set of economic and social forces. Discussants also helped us understand cultural differences in their communities of color which must be taken into account when shaping successful change efforts.

An Inadequate Child Welfare System

We were struck by the remarkably uniform picture all groups painted of the current child welfare system, a system they described repeatedly as too often insensitive, ineffective, fragmented, and remote. Six problem areas emerged as the principal targets of reform:

Racism and Cultural Insensitivity. Participants were convinced the current system was more focused on addressing its own institutional needs than on addressing the real needs of children, particularly children of color. That is, it did not serve children of any race as well as it should, and it often accorded families and children of color a second-class status. Discussants reported that families of color often confronted a continuum of prejudice-driven practices. At one end of this continuum were racist attitudes and stereotypes; at the other, a pervasive ignorance and fear of cultural differences. These conditions prevented system players at all levels from understanding and appreciating the strengths of different family structures and values.

Discussants traced much of this intolerance to America's historical oppression of groups of color and to the original tendency of adoption systems: to help middle and upper class white families adopt healthy, white infants. While participants acknowledged the importance of later reforms such as those advocating on behalf of "special needs children," they also pointed out that those movements had not typically empowered families of color.

Participants also reminded us that people of color had not been included in early system development and were still grossly underrepresented in its workforce, particularly in leadership positions. This, in spite of dramatic changes in the composition of client groups. A lack of diversity and the system's slow, incremental evolution had, they told us, prevented the fundamental reforms needed to address the changing needs of new client groups.

Ignorance and fear of cultural differences also created a complex series of problems. Participants said that the system often expected families and children of color to adopt middle class white norms in order to be deemed acceptable. Generic, technique-driven processes, rather than culturally appropriate ones that valued and built on diversity, disempowered families of color. And differences of race, ethnicity, and class between workers and families often led, participants told us, to a mutual mistrust and misunderstanding that tainted decisions about the fate of children.

Our review of the emerging literature on cultural differences in the human services supports these perceptions. Consider these examples from James W. Green's Cultural Awareness in the Human Services:

"... A survey was conducted among a group of social services workers in Alaska, workers who had daily contact with a number of urban Eskimo.... Despite the fact that the Eskimo have survived for thousands of years in one of the world's most harsh environments . . .[one] worker stated confidently that 'Natives have no long-range goals. They don't understand anything about planning for the future.' Although the Eskimo have been long known to anthropologists as a people with a finely developed sense of humor and decorum, one that assures emotional survival in tiny living spaces during the Arctic winter, one worker told an interviewer that the 'Natives have no psychological awareness; they don't know how to verbalize and express their emotions. It doesn't matter what they say because our central task is to teach them to verbalize and express emotions; nothing can deter us from that.'"(11)

For further discussion of these issues, see the feature article entitled "Assessing Your Cultural Competence," which follows.

Assessing Your "Cultural Competence" "*...culture can be thought of as those elements of a people's history, tradition, values, and social organization that become implicitly or explicitly meaningful to the participants during an encounter."*(6)

For decades, both the value and complications of cultural differences in our national life have been minimized by the myth of the "melting pot." This ideology allowed proponents to imagine that real differences were largely negative, or at best, quaint, and would ultimately dissolve as groups surrendered their individual identities to become part of a new, uniform national identity.

While the "melting pot" metaphor still has a grip on the popular consciousness, there is no social science evidence to suggest that it has or will become a reality. There is, however, a great deal of evidence to suggest, as J. W. Green has noted in *Cultural Awareness in the Human Services*, that "cultural differences reflect fundamental variations in what people hold to be worthwhile, and that as long as these variations persist they will invite comparison and questioning of the practices and values of the larger society."(7)

The growing body of knowledge on cultural sensitivity in social work practice is bringing such comparison and questioning to the social service professions. (8) Green argues, as do many other investigators, that the profession has a history of cultural insensitivity, and that the field should provide services to people "in ways which are culturally acceptable to them and which enhance their sense of ethnic group participation and power. This means that the worker, the service agency, its policies, and supportive educational and training programs all have the obligation to meet the client not only in terms of the specific problem presented, but in terms of the client's cultural and community background as well." (9)

Green offers, as an example of cultural sensitivity, his evaluation of an encounter between a white practitioner and a Native American client discussing the removal of the client's child:

"...The very fact that the interview was conducted in English would be culturally meaningful to the client, if not to the worker, because English is the language of the dominant society. An equally explicit cross-cultural feature of the relationship would be evident if the client proposed that the child be placed with the grandparents who understand Indian culture, rather than removed from the community. The culturally sensitive worker would recognize the client's proposal as a reference to an entire set of group-specific values on the role of older persons as having authority and providing advice to younger adults as well as to children. A cultural element - intergenerational family patterns within the group - would have been introduced into the encounter." (10)

There is still much work to be done to develop explicit guidelines for culturally sensitive practice in the child welfare system, as well as in the larger field of social services. However, the findings of Green and Nathaniel H. Mayes, and several other investigators provide a basis for determining many of the general characteristics of culturally competent practitioners.

The following questions are drawn from this research to help readers assess - in a shorthand way - their own "cultural competence." Those who can answer "yes" to all or most of the questions are likely to be effective at intercultural interactions:

- Have you assessed critically the strengths and limitations of your own family culture or ethnicity?
- Do you recognize that your own profession is itself a culture with a specific self-interest, values, language, rules, and limitations?
- Are you open intellectually and emotionally to evidence of cultural difference in others?
- Do you enjoy exploring the implications of cultural differences with others?
- Can you recognize and adapt easily to the learning styles of others?
- When acting as an advocate for a person of another culture, do you clearly identify the person or persons to whom you are ultimately accountable?
- When you manage, control, or discipline others, do you think carefully about whose interests your interventions actually serve?
- When you act as an intermediary between clients and institutional authorities, do you define the positive changes you strive to bring about for both parties?
- Are you skeptical about:
    - standardized diagnostic tools when applied to persons not of the dominant culture?
    - claims for the universality of culture-specific rules, norms, research samples, and "solutions"?
    - belief systems that divide cultures into those that are "deprived" and those that are "superior"?
    - "value-free," "culture-free" assumptions and practices?
    - research on "other" cultures that focuses on problems and ignores strengths?

Recent research on culture and ethnicity also asks us to remember that a given culture cannot be defined simply as a static bundle of fixed traits. It is better understood as something that constantly evolves and may shift even in the moment of intercultural communication, as workers and service recipients address different needs, see new opportunities, and attain different levels of trust. All parties to a transaction are responsible for understanding and responding constructively to cultural differences.

They should also remain alert to instances when false images of culture are being used to mask pathology or block needed change.

"Culture, ethnicity, race and gender must be considered in assigning appropriate caseworkers. At a minimum, the worker should be culturally, educationally, and polit-cally competent to represent the client base. They must also understand the problems of particular neighborhoods. Systems that are "generic" culturally don't work."

The Honorable David Ramirez
Judge, Denver Juvenile Court,
Denver, Colorado,
Participant, Latino/Hispanic Dialogue on Adoption Reform

Problematic Treatment Philosophies and Goals. The discussions served to remind us all of the dilemmas inherent in a system charged with ensuring the welfare of children, many of whom have already suffered neglect or abuse. On one hand, every effort must be made to protect them from further harm. Yet flexibility, innovation, and some degree of risk are necessary to honor the lifelong importance of family connections, to allow for growth and change in birth families, and to consider a full range of placement options if reunification is not possible.

Participants voiced strong support for vigilance on behalf of children, but felt the current system was too driven by a "protection and removal" mentality. This crisis orientation often precludes long-term planning, hampers prevention and reunification, rewards deficit thinking and permanency planning, and fails to distinguish between poverty-related parenting problems and actual unfitness. While a crisis orientation clearly and correctly recognizes the importance of safety, discussants said that it often fails to recognize the long-term damage caused by severing or limiting contact between children and their biological families.

Limited Definitions of "Family" and "Permanency." Participants were concerned by the system's tendency to limit children's placement options by seeing success in "either/or" terms: either reunification with birth families; or legal adoption within nuclear, unrelated families. This narrow perspective often leaves many viable opportunities unexplored: open adoption arrangements providing safety and preserving valuable contact between children and their biological families; kinship care by extended family and members of the family's natural support network; accelerated adoption by foster care parents; new forms of legal guardianship; single parent adoption; and co-parenting models involving more than one family.

Fragmented Fiscal Structure. The categorical nature of federal and state funding streams was discussed extensively at all the dialogues. Participants acknowledged that many system inadequacies were directly related to fragmented funding and inflexible resources that allowed individual workers virtually no discretion. Participants said that the system's fiscal underpinnings, though substantial, lead to fragmented program design and delivery, inhibit needed innovation, and set up fiscal incentives that encourage foster care placement rather than adoption. Participants also reminded us that the problem of fiscal fragmentation extends well beyond the programs and services designated for children. Since child removals disproportionately affect young, poor families with low levels of education, fiscal reform needs to address a wide range of family support services beyond the child welfare system itself.

Inadequate Service Delivery Systems. Participants also identified a series of non-fiscal factors limiting system effectiveness. The lack of focus on outcomes for children -- as distinct from bureaucratic convenience -- was their primary concern. They saw the absence of child-centered standards for adoption, post-adoptive services, and reunification, together with inadequate quality controls, as clear support for this position. Discussants also told us that the governmentalization of child welfare services in the 1960s had proliferated centralized bureaucracies that too often concentrated services far away from community centers and client homes. The effectiveness and sensitivity of front line workers -- frequently well-intended and hard-working -- are often compromised, discussants believe, by excessive caseloads, over-specialization, high turnover, and the division between child protective services and permanency planning units.

Lack of Advocacy for Children of Color. Many of our dialogue participants have worked in the child welfare field all their professional lives or dealt closely with system representatives as parents and/or advocates. These experiences gave their reflections on the current state of advocacy for change an especially compelling and troubling ring. They said that the community-based advocacy alliances which developed real strength in the 1960s were now weak or absent altogether. Newer efforts have been forced to compete with each other for funding and are often focused at the "ground level," rather than at the policy level where major change is formulated. Participants also reported that advocates both inside and outside the system lack support, focus, coordination, and critical resources such as action-oriented data and financing.

The Impact of New Economic and Social Forces

Our discussion participants were careful to place their reflections on the child welfare system in the context of several larger economic and social forces.

They reminded us, first of all, that the last decade and a half had been extraordinarily difficult for many communities of color. Unemployment rates, homelessness, and poverty had increased dramatically in many regions of the country, at the same time that safety net programs had been cut back or eliminated. Both developments, they said, had had devastating impacts on fragile urban neighborhoods, their institutions, and on the families that looked to them for material assistance and support. Participants saw economic breakdown, widespread despair, youth violence and destructive addictions to drugs, alcohol, and gambling within communities of color as directly related to long-term poverty and oppression. Community cohesiveness and effectiveness were further compromised, they said, when the federal government concentrated resources in large, centralized bureaucracies while neglecting smaller neighborhood networks and community development. The AIDS epidemic, with its disproportionate effects on poor urban neighborhoods, was also increasing the numbers of both special needs infants and healthy children who would ultimately be left without biological parents.

The dialogues repeatedly acknowledged that these developments were unraveling many vulnerable families, dramatically increasing the numbers of children in care, and thereby taxing the capacities of an already inadequate child welfare system.

The discussions reminded us all that comprehensive reform must emphasize prevention by increasing support services to vulnerable families. These reforms should also include community development and economic revitalization strategies to capitalize on existing neighborhood strengths and to rebuild the networks necessary to sustain families.

Recognizing Cultural Differences

While most of the problems identified in the discussions were common to all groups, our participants did identify some significant variations based on cultural differences and historical circumstances.

African-American participants told us, for example, that adoption fees charged by private agencies were significant barriers to the adoption of African-American children by African-American families. Since children of African-American slaves were often removed from their families by slave owners and summarily sold into bondage, such fees raise the specter of trafficking in children for profit. These fees are therefore opposed on principle by many African-Americans, even those who could afford to pay them. Others, who are less well-off, could not afford to pay adoption fees, even if they felt comfortable with the notion.

African-American participants also affirmed the importance of supporting and increasing the capacity of adoption agencies that specialize in placing of African-American children, and are operated by African-American child welfare professionals. Discussants identified several advantages of these agencies. First and foremost, their commitment to African-American children and families could be assured. Second, they typically have the trust of the community, strong family recruitment networks, and enhanced sensitivity to cultural issues. Finally, their small size and flexibility often allow them to try innovative approaches that might ultimately spur reform in larger public systems.

As major obstacles to reform, dialogue participants identified the dearth of these specialized agencies, their economic fragility, and the tendency of public agencies to resist releasing adoptable children to them for placement. (See the following feature entitled "Learning From Success: How to Recruit Adoptive Families of Color.")

Learning From Success: How to Recruit Adoptive Families of Color

More than half of all children waiting to be adopted are children of color. Most of these children are African-American. They not only suffer by being overrepresented in the pool of waiting children; statistics show that their adoptive placement percentages are well below those of white children. (See pie charts earlier in document)

Clearly, effective recruitment of families of color interested in adoption must be a fundamental part of child welfare service in every locality. Unfortunately, two persistent stereotypes continue to hinder recruitment efforts by many main-stream agencies: (1) that families of color are not interested in adoption and will not come forward in sufficient numbers even when recruited aggressively; and (2) that children of color are hard to place.

The track records of placement agencies established expressly to place children of color -- "specialty agencies" -- call these stereotypes into question. And, their experiences offer valuable lessons to mainstream agencies seriously committed to improving their profiles in communities of color.

The oldest and one of the most successful of the specialty agencies is Homes For Black Children (HBC) located in Detroit, Michigan. Founded in 1969, the agency now operates with a predominately African-American staff of 17. HBC provides both family preservation and adoptive services, and prides itself on its strong collaborative relationships with 13 other child-placing agencies in the area. To date, HBC has placed 1,100 children, including newborns, teenagers, large sibling groups, and children with significant drug exposure and other handicapping conditions.

Sydney Duncan, HBC's founding president, draws several conclusions from her agency's impressive track record: "When appropriate services are offered, families of color will adopt; successful recruitment doesn't have much to do with supply. It's much more an issue of agency process and behavior. We need to use common sense and remove the barriers that get in the way."

In addition to achieving its central mission, HBC has sparked change in a number of area child-placing agencies, many of which have initiated

African-American placement projects inspired by HBC's approaches. Duncan explains HBC's role this way: "HBC made it impossible for people to go on saying, 'It can't be done.' That's when accountability starts."

Although specialty agencies have some unique characteristics -- small size, flexible personnel practices, absence of fees, and strong roots in communities of color -- larger mainstream agencies can incorporate key elements of their philosophy and practice. These larger agencies can:

- serve the interests of the child first and foremost
- hire professionals of color at all levels and make cultural sensitivity a top priority
- locate services in communities of color near public transportation, and offer additional evening hours
- reevaluate eligibility requirements and remove standards that discriminate irrationally on the basis of age, fertility, income, home ownership, marital history, family size, and single-parent status
- streamline application and home study processes
- personalize service, and avoid unnecessary formality
- develop aggressive and culturally sensitive outreach programs
- focus more resources on recruitment and target efforts
- discover and use channels of communication preferred by communities of color

Spaulding For Children (Southfield, Michigan) is another pioneering specialty agency, having, since 1968, placed children least well served by the child welfare system -- now African-American boys over the age of 10. Judy McKensie, Spaulding's executive director, sees specialty agencies as indispensable elements of balanced child placement systems: "They are very important but not the whole solution. You don't want the other agencies simply abdicating their responsibilities to place special needs children, but specialty agencies should be one element of a diverse, collaborative system. They bring a potential energy to agitate the system, they open doors to the minority community, and they demonstrate the best practices."

Latino/Hispanic participants were especially concerned about the perceived erosion of their culture's strong traditional family values. They noted that while families continue to remain pivotal, the specific forms families assume are changing in their culture as well as across all of society. Several delegates, for example, pointed to the rise in single-parent Latina families that are unable, for a variety of reasons, to turn to their extended families for support. The lack of culturally congruent public and private support services are complicating the lives of these families rather than addressing their needs, participants told us.

They also reminded us all that Latino/Hispanic culture in America is now composed of Spanish speaking groups from at least 21 countries. The increasing diversity of their own communities was in fact a major point of discussion. While Mexicans and Puerto Ricans still comprise the largest Latino/Hispanic groups (13.5 and 2.5 million, respectively), new immigrants from Central and South American countries were said to be creating new service and advocacy challenges. The immigration to North America of Salvadorans - particularly Salvadoran children orphaned by civil war in their own homeland - was cited as a case in point. Latino/Hispanic discussants hailed recent movements by different groups to form coalitions and work together for the enhancement of services to Latino/Hispanic families as a sign of community strength.

Latino/Hispanic participants also expressed strong concern about the child welfare system's lack of culturally competent workers at every level of service. This lack of cultural competence expresses itself most obviously, participants said, in the widespread assumption that all Latino/Hispanic clients are the same and can be treated identically -- despite their different countries of origin. Participants argued that workers need comprehensive information about a variety of human service issues in order to create viable plans. Workers need to know, for example, the history of Latino/Hispanics in their service areas; their reasons for immigrating; their immigration status and level of employment or unemployment; their access to housing and transportation; as well as their capacity to speak English. Beyond such basic information, participants said that cultural competence requires a knowledge and appreciation of Latino/Hispanic values, traditions, and family structure.

Since language is a principal medium for expressing and understanding culture, and the key to negotiating exchanges in any system, participants saw the lack of bicultural and bilingual workers as a major obstacle to effective communication between the system's representatives and families and children. Participants strongly opposed the widespread practice of using children to provide translation services. They argued instead that the system should hire more workers who are both culturally and linguistically competent, and provide training on sophisticated translation-related issues such as confidentiality, liability, and agency mission.

The pervasive lack of cultural competence among providers, together with the dearth of Latino/Hispanics in a position to advocate on behalf of these concerns within the system, were seen as the most serious barriers to serving Latino/Hispanic families and children well.

Native American representatives also raised issues of diversity and cultural competence. They reminded us first of the astounding diversity of federally-recognized tribes: 500 that are federally recognized, many others recognized by states but not the U.S. government, and over 100 Alaska Native villages. Taken together, they represent a remarkable variety of languages and value systems. This diversity, coupled with small overall numbers and wide geographical dispersion, makes effective advocacy on behalf of Native American children and families extraordinarily difficult, participants told us. Advocacy is also hampered, they said, by the low priority of child welfare issues on many tribal council agendas. The geographical remoteness that limits advocacy also acts as a barrier to accessing services.

Indian participants were profoundly troubled by the rising rates of child abuse and early addiction in many of their reservation communities, and with the widespread denial of these problems by many, but not all, tribal leaders and Indian social services agencies. The long assault on tribal spirituality, customs, and values (particularly those related to the sacredness of children) that has been carried on historically by federal and state governments, as well as churches and private agencies, was seen as a major cause of Indian cultural and family decline. The Bureau of Indian Affairs' long-standing practice of using Indian boarding schools as "instruments of assimilation" is a particularly tragic example of this assault on culture.(12) For much of the first half of the century and as recently as the 1970s, this practice was responsible both for the removal of thousands of Native American children from their families and communities and for the systematic denigration of Native American culture. Alienated from their cultures of origin and deprived of healthy models of family life, many Native Americans who grew up in these schools have been unable to transmit essential values to their children. Discussants told us that the loss of Native American culture among today's Indian youth was particularly striking and disturbing.

The extreme oppression and paternalism of the federal government toward Native Americans over time had, participants said, resulted in low community self-esteem and in a sense of powerlessness to exercise existing tribal authority in child welfare cases. This, in spite of Indian culture's strong commitment to care for its own. Differences in values and perceptions, and a lack of under-standing between reservation and urban Native American populations only complicated the successful exercise of independent authority on behalf of Indian children and families.

Finally, Native American participants told us that the passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act had been a bittersweet victory. On the one hand the Act had established tribal sovereignty and jurisdiction over the placement of Indian children. On the other hand, the Act's inadequate funding and accountability structures, together with its lack of specificity regarding critical terms, reduced its effectiveness in encouraging the placement of Indian children with Indian families.

Both Native American and Latino/Hispanic participants told us repeatedly that the lack of a child welfare data collection and analysis capacity was the single most important obstacle to effective, coordinated, national advocacy efforts on behalf of their children.

Families For Kids of Color: A Preliminary Blueprint for Reform

As we pored over transcripts of the dialogues, we could see the broad outlines of a reform agenda for families and children of color. Its goal was, of course, to make a real difference for waiting children in very particular ways. To achieve this goal, participants offered several overarching principles of reform, together with a large number of quite specific recommendations for achieving each of the five Families for Kids outcomes for children. We turn now to this preliminary blueprint for change.

The Driving Goal

All the dialogues reaffirmed this central goal: the need to secure swift, suitable, culturally appropriate placements for waiting children. When such placements can be achieved by assisting biological parents, all necessary support services should be available. When reunification is not possible, a continuum of permanency options -- including but not limited to traditional adoption -- should be considered. When children are removed from their birth families, the ties to their biological families, and to their communities and culture, should be honored and preserved if at all possible.

The Overarching Principles

The principles of reform defined by ourparticipants are directly related to the problem areas they identified as the major targets of reform: racism and cultural insensitivity, limiting treatment orientations and "either/or" permanency thinking, fragmented fiscal structures, inadequate service delivery systems, and a lack of effective advocacy for all children, particularly children of color.

Empowering the Community Response. To counter the racism and cultural insensitivity in the child welfare system, participants proposed that reforms focus on empowering the community response. This means giving parents, children, extended families, churches, advocates, and other community players clear roles in shaping new systems of care and in day-to-day system decision making. Examples of such empowerment include:

- building community capacity through strategic leadership and community development, and antipoverty initiatives
- establishing community-based, family-centered, culturally appropriate services, and disseminating successful models
- training and hiring more people of color for roles in the system; reassessing the need for graduate degrees in some jobs
- supporting culture-specific adoption agencies
- allowing multi-tribal entities to provide services to children and families of color (e.g., let them license foster care)
- supporting community-based organizations and contracting out some services to these agencies
- relocating system services to individual communities
- educating community members to understand and use available services

Changing the Orientation of the System. Dialogue participants advocated a shift of emphasis from out-of-home placement to family preservation and support, and a change of professional thinking from deficit-based models of assessment and permanency planning to family-centered models that build on existing family strengths. Participants also stressed the need to win institutional support for a more realistic and expansive definition of "family" that transcends the narrow confines of the nuclear model. They also argued for a greater range of placement options for children. To accomplish these changes, participants recommended:

- bringing family preservation programs to scale
- widely disseminating family-centered model programs and approaches
- legitimizing new permanency options
- expanding the use of kinship care models already common in communities of color

The dialogues also recognized the need for a major change in public attitudes about adoption and foster care, as well as substantial reorientation and skill development for professionals who work with families and children. To bring these broad-based changes in thinking and attitudes about, participants envisioned:

- massive training initiatives on cultural competency and family-centered service models for child welfare workers, students of social work and law, attorneys, judges, and other system players
- nationwide communication campaigns to make the general public aware of the plight of children in care, and to correct myths and misunderstandings about who they are

Reordering Funding Patterns. Discussants recognized that system design, service quality, and worker attitudes are driven to a significant extent by funding patterns. Thus they affirmed the need to:

- de-categorize funds and bridge different fiscal streams
- increase the use of fiscal incentives, and change them to emphasize family preservation and support; and to reward permanency placement, not foster care
- develop stronger partnerships with the federal government to better utilize existing dollars
- use foundation grants (including grants from minority philanthropies) to achieve these ends

Revising Service Delivery Systems. Participants suggested that services to families and children need to be more culturally appropriate, collaborative, simple, effective, and accessible. Examples of needed changes include:

- installing community-based service centers with a comprehensive range of services
- using advanced telecommunications and computer technology to enhance collaboration, service accessibility, and efficiency
- personalizing services by dropping unnecessary formality and symbolism, and decentralizing delivery
- developing and using culturally competent assessment and placement tools and tests; better balancing quantitative and qualitative data in decision making
- developing culturally appropriate mental health services
- seeing community organizations as partners and resources
- pushing for system accountability through the use of Total Quality Management principles and practices and other performance-based measures (including long-term evaluation of outcomes)
- considering the use of mediation to replace formal adversarial court processes

Strengthening Advocacy for Families and Children of Color. Participants were unanimous in their belief that strong, centralized advocacy organizations armed with data, authority, resources, and community support are desperately needed to exert real influence at the national level: first to develop broad visions of child welfare reform, and then to push agendas for change on behalf of families and children of color.

We encouraged all three groups to consider how they might plan and implement activities that would help their own children. A good deal of dialogue time was used for action-oriented planning to transform ideas for change into specific initiatives and grant proposals. Ultimately, each group developed and submitted a proposal to the Foundation. In the summer of 1994, the Foundation awarded each group a one-year, $100,000 planning grant to flesh out their reform initiatives and enlist others to help refine goals and strategies.

Native American participants, for example, began to imagine a national Indian advocacy resource center that could take direction from Indian communities but maintain a national focus. The center would offer policy education on the needs of Indian children to national Indian organizations and mainstream children's lobbying groups like the Child Welfare League of America. Some immediate issues for advocacy would be cultural competency for child welfare professionals and

amendments to the Indian Child Welfare Act. Participants thought such a center could also develop a sophisticated data collection and analysis system for advocacy purposes, provide technical assistance to tribes on such matters as computer literacy and legal intervention, develop media strategies, and facilitate networking and empowerment within and across tribes.

Bringing Each Outcome Into Being

The five principles of reform define general shifts in thinking and structure needed to bring about comprehensive, fundamental change. Of course, many, more specific actions will be necessary to bring each of the Families for Kids outcomes into being.

We present now the specific recommendations that dialogue participants endorsed, together with brief annotations of our own, to clarify relationships between individual recommendations. The annotations and participant recommendations appear below the full text of each outcome, as follows.

Outcome #1: Vulnerable families will have the help they need to stay together and meet the challenges of daily life.

Readers should note that recommendations here fall into two broad categories on a continuum of services that runs from early prevention efforts to post-adoptive support: (1) services that encourage expanded training and support for parents and communities to prevent family breakups, and (2) those that help children and families pass swiftly and positively through the system once out-of-home placement of children has occurred:

- increase the quality and duration of prevention efforts to keep families and children out of the system in the first place (e.g., extend in-home family preservation programs and teach families assertiveness skills)
- reform federal child welfare statutes to provide family preservation funds to local communities
- develop and use specific standards for family reunification
- encourage communities to actively confront sexual abuse and train child welfare workers on this issue
- provide mentors to help children and families get appropriate legal representation and support in negotiating the system
- provide educational stipends to minority social work students in exchange for postgraduate placements in adoption agencies
- make translation services more available and culturally competent

Native American participants suggested several additional interventions to ensure adequate family support services: educational programs and cultural opportunities to help tribes reaffirm and revitalize cultural values, traditions, and customary law; consciousness-raising of tribal leaders on Indian child welfare issues; and assistance for reservation and urban Indian populations to help them overcome barriers to understanding and cooperation. Indian dialogue participants also urged tribes to use their legal authority to develop and codify into law new child protection standards based on traditional values and practices.

Outcome #2: Families will participate fully in a single, coordinated assessment process that evaluates their needs in a comprehensive way.

We noticed that recommendations for this outcome focused on ways to empower the community and family as real partners in assessment and case planning. These recommendations would improve the system's capacity to understand and capitalize on cultural differences. They would:

- press for early assessment
- give family and community members the decision-making power and resources necessary to make a difference in assessment and case planning
- use relatives to provide secure environments for children when placement is disputed
- give community-based liaison people and agencies influential roles in the assessment process
- conduct assessments outside bureaucracies in family and community settings
- support new placement paradigms, particularly those that break down traditional boundaries (See earlier section, "Limited Definitions of Family and Permanency")
- help workers feel safe in "war zone" communities so that they can perceive strengths and see new family-friendly options
- create more opportunities for professionals of all races to work side by side on cases
- create standards for culturally appropriate care

Outcome #3: One caseworker or casework team will work with a child and his/her family or families throughout the permanency planning process.

Recommendations for this outcome were about evenly divided between strategies to help professionals find the time and expertise to work collaboratively, and those that point the way to better relationships with and among families. They encouraged systems to:

- use multidisciplinary case teams with generalist capabilities
- encourage collaboration between agencies, with a single point of entry for children and families
- reduce and limit the size of caseloads
- make services more mobile (e.g., use interactive TV and Internet)
- use electronic technology to create a paperless system
- ensure that permanency plans take contextual issues like transportation, drug treatment, and employment into account
- use incentives more than sanctions to gain families' cooperation
- establish mechanisms for biological and foster parents to work together cooperatively
- revisit and revise old confidentiality laws

Outcome #4: Children awaiting permanent placement will be cared for in their own communities by a single foster family.

These recommendations offer strategies to increase the number and quality of foster care families. Of special interest is the emphasis on expanding the use of relatives and members of the families' natural support system. Participants also suggested that child welfare professionals should:

- screen foster care parents more carefully and monitor placements
- fully inform and train foster care parents, and provide them with respite care, counseling, and other supportive services
- recruit more foster care parents
- use waivers to increase the numbers of foster care parents
- use AFDC moms as foster parents
- allow foster parents to train workers in the system
- require states to follow existing kinship care laws
- insist on better kinship care searches, and consider placement beyond family members and among neighbors; consider kinship guardianships with subsidies

Outcome #5: Waiting children will be placed in nurturing, permanent homes within one year.

Here recommendations offer a broad range of ways to speed permanent placement: by streamlining the placement process, increasing the supply of traditional and nontraditional adoptive families, ensuring culturally sensitive adoptions, and supporting adoptive parents after adoptions have been finalized so that disruptions are less likely to occur. Such reforms would:

- simplify the adoption process instead of adding more bells and whistles (do in three steps what's now done in six)
- establish definite time frames for placement, and tie funding to compliance
- train and win the support of judges on new, shorter timelines for placement
- improve recruitment and training of adoptive families
- support nontraditional placement paradigms such as those described on page 8
- expand and subsidize kinship care practices
- establish and support more culture-specific adoption agencies, help them develop their own economic base, and create fiscal incentives to expand the number of children released to them from public agencies
- insist on evidence that community representatives have been involved in placement decisions
- fund research on post-adoption and adoption service outcomes
- establish post-adoptive standards and practices
- provide ongoing, post-adoption services to families with difficult circumstances
- increase the number of culture-specific adoption support groups, and recognize the value of the support group model as one option to be considered
- use surrogate parents to provide support to foster and adoptive parents
- support same-race foster care and adoptive placement

The Foundation itself does not have an official position on the same-race placement of children. Yet, we think it important to emphasize that in every dialogue we heard passionate resistance to transracial placement of children. Participants acknowledged that the number of transracial adoptions, in particular, remain relatively low, but feared significant increases if the issue is not addressed forcefully.(13)

Their conviction appeared to grow out of two different, but closely related, beliefs. First, that children of all cultures are best nurtured within their own cultures; and second, that a sufficient supply of families of color would be available to care for children of color if child welfare agencies developed positive, collaborative relationships with communities of color, and recruited more aggressively and effectively. Participants pointed to the documented successes of culture-specific adoption agencies and their capacity to establish such relationships quickly, and to attract large numbers of prospective, same-race adoptive families. (See "Learning From Success: How to Recruit Adoptive Families of Color," earlier in this document.)

Latino/Hispanic participants believed that their children were being transracially placed at higher rates than children of other cultures. They attributed this difference to the desire of many white families to adopt children with light complexions, and to the lack of public and private agencies willing to recruit specifically for Latino/Hispanic families. Since agency funding is often tied to numbers of placements completed, Latino/Hispanic participants also feared that cultural sensitivity in placement decisions was being compromised by budgetary pressures.

In addition to the preceding list of generally applicable recommendations for speedy, appropriate placement, Native American participants recommended several initiatives particular to their families and children: pushing tribal enrollment in a systematic way to establish children's heritage early on; strengthening tribal-state relationships (heightening recognition of tribal leaders, especially); increasing adoption subsidies to Indian families; changing Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) definitions related to adoption; and codifying into Indian customary law tribal concepts of permanent placement. They also noted that some tribes would need technical assistance to fully implement ICWA and other relevant laws.

Conclusions

As we reflect on all the dialogues, several lessons stand out for us. First there is the recognition that, to our knowledge, these people of color dialogues on adoption reform are unique. We cannot remember ever having heard of a series of forums which invited advocates from African-American, Latino/Hispanic, and Native American communities to gather in both individual and cross-cultural groups to define a child welfare reform agenda.

What might this awareness tell us about the history and the future of reform? We think it points to the central, enduring importance of involving all stakeholders in reform planning and implementation, particularly those who were excluded in the past. The recent history of reform is rife with failures and blemished successes, partly because we've taken so long to learn this lesson, and partly because we tend to forget it as the political context changes and new reform paradigms gain favor.

In our own experience, the benefits of community-based, inclusive approaches far outweigh their complications -- and the benefits accrue to everyone. Our dialogue participants have told us again and again how important it is to have continuing opportunities to overcome their sense of isolation from fellow reformers in their own groups and from other groups of color. Our own sense of what reforms are needed has been enlarged by the diversity of our collaborators. Our other Families for Kids grantees will learn valuable lessons from the dialogues to amplify their already expansive community-based planning processes.

We expect that "empowering the community response," to invoke our discussants' first principle of reform, must also be a major thrust in future national policy development. This call for the intensive engagement of family members and communities of color should not, however, be misinterpreted as support for separatist solutions or for a return to block grant funding without mandates and accountability. We believe, in concert with our discussants, that existing child welfare agencies must increasingly enter into cooperative, collaborative relationships with families, members of their natural support systems, and community organizations, giving them more responsibility for and influence in decisionmaking that affects their destinies. And, while child welfare reform must be addressed locally, most state and local governments do not have the resources necessary to go it alone; thus, the federal government will have to maintain a strong role in child welfare funding, policymaking, and oversight.

Accountability at every level of service must also be improved: first by developing standards of care based on the real needs of children, and second, by measuring performance in terms of an exacting bottom line: virtually every waiting child must be placed swiftly and appropriately in a family setting that affords stability and lifelong ties.

We think that many of the other overarching principles of reform, as defined in these dialogues, must also become part of the national template for change. The child welfare system will need to make a major investment of energy and resources to overcome lingering prejudices, as well as ignorance and fear of cultural differences. Such an investment must begin with a new system-wide awareness of the importance of cultural sensitivity in service delivery and include serious efforts to diversify system workforces at every level, increase the cultural competence of existing workers, and make culture an issue in professional education.

The current limiting definitions of "family" and "permanency" will need to be reimagined and expanded through the development of new concepts and options. Fragmented fiscal structures must be realigned to support family- and child-centered programs and services. Our child welfare system must emphasize permanency placement rather than perpetuating the current over-reliance on foster care. Services should be decentralized and rooted in the communities they are designed to serve.

We look forward to the advances of our grantees, and we continue to remind ourselves of this simple truth: All that we do will be of little consequence if we fail to find loving, permanent homes for the children who wait.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1 This estimate was provided by the North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC). It is based on the last known number of children in public foster care (442,000 in 1992) as reported in the *Green Book* (Ways and Means Committee, U.S. House of Representatives, 1992). NACAC has updated the 1992 figure using projections from selected states.

Data from The Voluntary Cooperative Information System (VCIS) of the American Public Welfare Association are the basis for the *Green Book* figures. The substitute care population as defined by the VCIS report entitled, "Characteristics of Children in Substitute Care," (FY 82 through FY 90) are "those children residing outside of their own homes under the case management and planning responsibility of the primary state child welfare agency or child placing agencies under contract to the primary agency." "Residing outside of their own homes" was defined to include such living arrangements as foster family or adoptive foster homes, group homes, child care facilities, emergency care shelters, supervised independent living, non-finalized adoptive home placements, and all other arrangements regarded as 24-hour substitute care by the state agency, except finalized adoptive home placements.

2 According to the U.S. Census, "Current Population Reports P25-1105, Population Projections of the United States by Age, Sex, Race and Hispanic Origin: 1993 to 2050," children of color age 18 and under comprised 32.49 percent of the child population nationally in 1993; thus, their representation in the substitute care population-approximately 57 percent-is 1.75 times their representation in the general child population.

The 57 percent figure is an aggregation of African-American, Hispanic, and "Other" categories (see pie chart graphic insert). The "Other" category is thought to include mainly Asian American and Native American children but may also count some children who are not recognized as "minority" under existing federal definitions.

One of the causes for the explosion in substitute care in recent years may be a substantial increase in the use of kinship care by public agencies. This practice may be especially widespread for children of color. While children placed in such arrangements are removed from their parents, they are clearly not residing in foster care with someone other than friends and relatives.

3 McKensie, Judith K., Adoption of children with special needs. *The Future of Children: Adoption*. (Spring 1993) 3, 1: 69.

4 *Ibid*., p. 67.

5 These figures were provided by the North American Council on Adoptable Children (NACAC). They include all children in public foster care who have had their parental rights terminated and all children with a plan of adoption whose parental rights are still intact. The latter group includes children for whom reunification with birth families has not worked, but for whom the legal work necessary to terminate parental rights is not yet complete.

6 Green, J. W., *Cultural Awareness in the Human Services*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, Prentice Hall. 1982, p. 7.

7 *Ibid*., p. 3.

8 Other books and articles on cultural awareness of special interest: Harrison, D.F., J.S. Wodarski, & B.A. Thyer (eds.) (1992) Cultural diversity and social work practice. Springfield, Illinois; Charles C. Thomas, Slonim, M. (1991). Children, culture and ethnicity: evaluating and understanding the impact. New York: Gardian Publishing; Hansen, J. C., (Ed.) (1983) Cultural perspectives in family therapy, Rockville, Maryland, Aspen Systems Corporation; Mayes, Nathaniel H. "Teacher Training for Cultural Awareness," in David S. Hoopes, Paul B. Pederson, and George Renwick, eds., *Overview of Intercultural Education, Training and Research, Volume II: Education and Training* (Washington, D.C.: Society for Intercultural Education, Training and Research) pp. 35-44.

9 Green, *Cultural Awareness*, p. 4.

10 *Ibid*., p. 7.

11 *Ibid*., pp. 4-5.

12 Canby, William C., Jr., (1988) *American Indian Law in a Nutshell*. (2nd ed.) St. Paul, Minnesota: West Publishing Company, pp. 44-45

13 According to 1987 data from the National Health Interview Survey, eight percent of all U.S. adoptions are transracial in nature. Some of the adoptions counted in these data are of foreign-born children of color. For more statistical information on transracial adoption, see "Statistics on Adoption in the United States," by Kathy S. Stolley, in *The Future of Children: Adoption* (Spring 1993) 3, 1:34.

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